Why The Image of God Matters so Much

What does it mean to be made in God's image? Why does the “Imago Dei” (Latin for Image of God) matter so much? If you grew up in Sunday school, you might answer, "It's what makes us different from animals." That's not wrong, but it's also incomplete. Understanding what it truly means to bear God's image transforms how we love God and love our neighbors.

Beyond The Animals

The creation story in Genesis 1 does differentiate humans from animals. God pauses before creating mankind and says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). For years, people concluded that whatever separates us from animals must be the image of God. We can reason. We can love. We're driven by more than instinct.

But here's what we miss when we stop there: Genesis also tells us we have a lot in common with animals. Land animals and humans were both created on day six. God made Adam from dirt, just as the earth brought forth the animals. The Bible actually affirms our similarity to creation, not just our distinction from it.

When we define the image of God solely as "what makes us better than animals," we create problems. What about people with severe disabilities? What about the unborn? A baby in the womb has less capability than many animals. Are they somehow less in God's image? Of course not. We're missing something crucial.

An Ancient Revolutionary Text

To understand what Moses meant when he wrote Genesis, we need to step back into the Ancient Near East. In that world, only kings bore the image of the gods. A stone monument from around 1300 BC shows Pharaoh Ramses II's court praising him as "the living image on earth of thy father Atum of Heliopolis." Kings would erect statues of themselves throughout their kingdoms as a way of saying, "I may not be here physically, but my authority is."

This practice continued with Roman leaders who put their faces on coins. When Jesus held up a denarius and asked, "Whose image is this?" everyone knew the answer: Caesar's. And everyone understood what that meant. Caesar claimed divine status. His image on every coin reminded the empire who ruled the world.

Into this context, Genesis makes a shocking declaration: not just kings, but all humanity bears God's image. Male and female. Rich and poor. Powerful and weak. The Hebrew slaves building bricks in Egypt? Made in God's image. Every shepherd, every servant, every person carries the divine image.

This is revolutionary. While Egypt declared that only the Pharaoh bore divine status, Israel proclaimed that these enslaved brick-makers reflected God himself.

What This Means for Us

Think about how children reflect their parents, not just in appearance but in mannerisms, values, and character. Adam had a son "in his own likeness, in his own image" (Genesis 5:3).

We bear God's image in two ways. First, inherently, just as children share their parents' DNA. We can't help but reflect God because we're connected to him as our creator. Second, we choose whether to follow in his footsteps, to act like him, to represent him well in the world.

Here's where it gets practical. God calls us to steward creation as his representatives. We're little kings and queens, given dominion not for exploitation but for care. Genesis 1:28 tells us to "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." This is about flourishing, about bringing order from chaos, about making the world reflect God's goodness.

When we live according to God's design, we look like image-bearers. When we rebel and live for ourselves, we start looking more like beasts, driven by appetites and power. The book of Daniel illustrates this perfectly when prideful King Nebuchadnezzar is humbled, literally eating grass in the fields like an animal, until he recognizes God's authority (Daniel 4).

The Dignity of Every Person

If every human being bears God's image, this transforms how we treat others. Consider Genesis 9:6: "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind." Human life is sacred not because of our accomplishments, beauty, or power, but because we reflect our Creator.

This should transform how we approach:

Criminal justice: Our prison system often treats people like animals in cages. What would it look like to pursue both justice and restoration, recognizing the image of God even in those who've committed crimes?

Immigration: When fear drives policy, it creates opportunities for abuse and dehumanization. How can we honor the image of God in every person while also addressing legitimate security concerns and economic needs?

The unborn and elderly: From conception to death, every human life carries inherent dignity that our society must protect.

The image of God can be distorted by sin, like a gold bar covered in paint, but it's never destroyed. That person struggling with addiction? Made in God's image. The person who wronged you? Made in God's image. Your political opponent? Made in God's image.

How We Speak Matters

James 3 connects the image of God directly to our words: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be."

Jesus goes even further in Matthew 5, equating angry words with murder. If taking someone's life is serious because they bear God's image, then how we speak about and to others is also serious. This means:

- No gossip or slander
- No dehumanizing language (think about terms like "libtards" or "deplorables")
- No demonizing those we disagree with
- Civility in disagreement
- Kindness online and in person (no trolling)

When politicians or public figures we support use degrading language, we should call it out. Our words matter because they're directed at people who bear God's image.

The Perfect Image

Ultimately, the image of God points us to Jesus. Colossians 1:15 declares, "The Son is the image of the invisible God." Hebrews 1:3 says Jesus is "the exact representation of his being."

We all fall short of perfectly reflecting God. We're image-bearers who've marred the image through sin. But Jesus, the perfect image-bearer, took our distortion upon himself at the cross. Through his death and resurrection, he's restoring the image in us.

When God looks at those who trust in Christ, he sees not our failures but Jesus' perfect righteousness. The Holy Spirit is at work transforming us into Christ's image (2 Corinthians 3:18), a process that will be completed when we see him face to face.

Rev. Dr. Jonathan Romig used AI to adapt the closed captions from Theology Together's Image of God video to draft this blog post. He carefully reviewed and posted it to help highlight the main points of why the Image of God matters for Christians today.

Discussion Questions

1. What did you find new and surprising about the Image of God in the Bible?

2. How does understanding that all people bear God's image change the way you view people you disagree with politically, religiously, or personally?
3. Being made in God's image means we're called to "steward creation as his representatives." What does this look like practically in your everyday life?

Other Resources

Download our Image of God Slide Deck for free!

Check out our faith and politics sermon on the Image of God.